

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

BRITTON L. SHEPARDSON

Q. How did you get into archaeology, and specifically Easter Island archaeology? What triggered your interest?

A. I don't think I can pinpoint that one moment where I "knew" I'd be an archaeologist. A lot of the interest came from traveling with my older brother and my parents when I was little. This was all in the 1980s when a lot of these places were still pretty hard to get to, but my parents used to pull us out of school and we'd just go.... Nepal, Mexico, Peru, South Africa, Botswana, the Seychelles, the British Virgin Islands, Thailand, Costa Rica. By the time I was four years old, my parents had me hauling a backpack through the remote villages of the Himalayas. It probably fell somewhere between a liberal education and child abuse. And almost always, we would make a point to check out some of the local archaeology.

What attracted me to the Pacific and Rapa Nui was that this was a whole section of the globe where I had never traveled as a child, and really no teachers ever mentioned in elementary school or high school. When I finally had a chance to participate in fieldwork in California, it was the lifestyle that hooked me. I love being outside. I love a little adventure. And I love that feeling of discovery.

Q. Who or what do you consider as your most significant influence (scientific or otherwise) either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?

A. Without a doubt, my parents Fred and Julia. I owe the world to them, and if I could do even half of what they've done to make this world a better place, I'd consider myself a success. In 2001, my mother was declared as an "Unsung Hero of Compassion" by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in recognition of her tireless work with refugees and resettlement projects. My father, in addition to being a humanitarian in his own right, is a mathematician and a scientist, and he really pushes me to produce objective and innovative archaeological research.

Q. What theory or project of yours turned out to be different from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?

A. I think my nine-year career on Rapa Nui has been a surprise all along. It wasn't until I had finished a college degree in mathematics nine years ago that I even considered pursuing a career in archaeology. More specifically, I think my interest in education on Rapa Nui was a bit of a surprise, when my only goal initially was archaeological research. I am one of those lucky few

people who has had the time and the permission to conduct extensive scientific research on more than 700 *moai* or statues.* And while I continue with that research, I see my responsibility on the island more and more as helping to educate the younger generation on the island. These students have very little time to prepare for an onslaught of tourism and development, and to fully grasp the value of the cultural and archaeological resources that are at stake in their back yards.



Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?

A. I was a math major in college and played on a top-10 NCAA DIV III tennis team. So, I'd probably either be teaching tennis full-time or be working in some kind of computer programming. Of course, no matter where I go, I still seem to find time to teach tennis, and I'm writing computer programs for my archaeological research anyhow. These are all things I love to do, so if archaeology wasn't on top, it'd still be somewhere in the mix.

Q. What was your best Eureka moment?

A. My jaw pretty much hit the floor when I began to compare a map of my statue database with a map of historic territorial divisions on the island produced by Katherine Routledge. Ninety years had passed between the time Routledge drew her maps and I drew mine and apparently no one had noticed the island-wide correlation between

inland statue locations and historic territories. Admittedly, a lot more work is required to fully understand this correlation. But even as a possibility — that these huge stone statues were placed as boundary markers around the island — I find it extraordinary that I may be the first person to have realized it. Archaeologists don't often get the chance to discover this type of "big-picture" pattern. And all of a sudden, these inland statues that most archaeologists have tossed aside as "abandoned in transport" begin to paint a different picture for the island's prehistory. What was once assumed to be "evidence" of the catastrophic conclusion to the statue industry may become proof of a healthy and complex sociopolitical system in the island's prehistory.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in archaeology) on Easter Island in the future?

A. I hope that 'A Pó (www.terevaka.net/apo), the educational outreach program on the island that I started back in 2003, continues indefinitely. The program has so much potential, and it's the only one of its kind on the island that aims to prepare local youth for the very serious issues they will soon face in cultural conservation. The program has already managed to combine education with archaeological research, and I hope in the future we can begin to integrate aspects of tourism and leadership to achieve a completely self-sustaining initiative.

I also hope to continue with research on the statues and prehistoric territoriality. I believe that I can continue with my line of non-invasive research on the island. It takes creativity and patience, but I think we can still learn a lot from the island's archaeology without actually digging or disrupting sites.

Q. What is your favorite Easter Island site and why?

A. That's a tough one. I'd have to say the Te O'i Renga sector. It's about a forty-minute hike from Rano Raraku. There's a beautiful *ahu* there and several *moai*. The best part about it is that I've never seen another person in that area. You get there and the sounds stop, the winds die down, and it's like a time machine. You just imagine the island any way you want it.

Q. What myth or misinformation about Easter Island would you like to dispel?

A. I think any exact figure for the number of statues constructed in prehistoric times that still exist today is a total myth. I've seen erosion, fractures, bodies missing heads, heads missing bodies, and unidentifiable fragments first-hand. Statues have been shipped overseas, hidden away in caves and on private property on the island, and buried by centuries of sediment. I can tell you that there are at least 710 prehistoric statues on the island today, and if that's not enough to impress you, then you may have your sights

for prehistoric human achievement set a bit too high. To say that there are precisely 710 statues or precisely 887 statues or any other number is a myth. Whatever the count is today, I assure you that it's not a whole number. These are the vagaries we have to learn to accept sometimes in archaeology.

Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Easter Island?

A. I think that a state of emergency for the island and its archaeology, as a direct result of growth in tourism, is closer than we might want to believe. And I think education on the island is key — archaeological conservation, alternative energy sources, land management, eco-tourism, etc. Unless the next generation of islanders is prepared and pro-active, we are going to lose a lot of what makes the island so special.

Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Easter Island archaeology or anthropology (or these fields generally)?

A. Go for it! But don't expect anything to happen too quickly or how you planned.

Q. If you could, what would you change about the fields of archaeology or anthropology?

A. Having a foundation in mathematics, I'm often frustrated by the loose terminology and the tendency for archaeologists to speculate on a level beyond what I find to be reasonable. It's hard to know whom to blame — Journals? Archaeologists? Readers? In the end, I think it's the whole system. And if I could change one thing to get to the bottom of it, I'd change the way that universities use publications as incentive in faculty jobs and tenure. I think too often it leads to a quantity vs. quality dilemma. And I think too often quantity is winning the battle.

On the flip side, I think anthropologists and archaeologists should be pushed more firmly to publish raw data. I think our anthropological interpretations should be a dialogue (anthropologists, archaeologists, *and* the public) based on published data, rather than a few experts hoarding data and publishing at a furious pace to advance their careers.

Q. What are you currently reading?

A. Non-fiction. I've managed to start — but not finish — several books now: *Cultural Resource Laws & Practice*; *The Elegant Universe*; *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*; *A People's History of the United States*; and of course, passages from a number of Rapa Nui archaeology sources.

Q. Credentials?

A. Honorary Diploma, Brother Eugenio Eyraud High School, Rapa Nui (2008); PhD in archaeology, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (2006); MA in anthropology, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (2002); BA in mathematics, Claremont McKenna College, California (2000).

Q. Place and date of birth?

A. Boston, Massachusetts. April 29, 1977.

* See the statues at <www.terevaka.net/dc/databases/shepardson_2009/moai_pt1.html>.

Photo by Brett Shepardson.

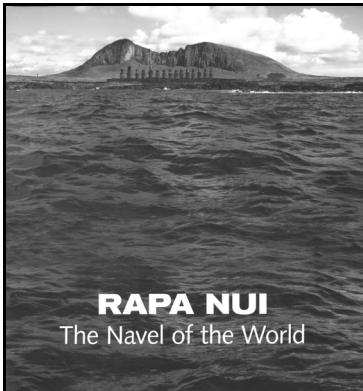
REVIEWS

RAPA NUI: THE NAVEL OF THE WORLD **José Miguel Ramírez**

Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino
/ Banco Santander, 2008

soft cover; 120 pages (ISBN 978-956-243-057-9)
\$40+\$16 s&h (tienda@museoprecolombino.cl, Santiago)

Review by Shawn McLaughlin



As I've written elsewhere, there are three types of works on the subject of Easter Island — scholarly publications sometimes difficult to digest by the lay public; publications that ought to be classified as fiction even though they technically meet the non-fiction criteria for bookstores and libraries; and non-fiction publications (some by

eminent archaeologists and other specialists in their fields) with a bent towards the average reading public — which includes coffee-table books full of beautiful pictures. Examples in the latter category include *Easter Island* by Michael Kenna; *Rapa Nui, 110 Años* by Giovanni Carella Allaria; *Easter Island* by Carlos Mordo; *Tepito O Te Henua* by Luis Poirot; *L'Ile de Paques* by Joël Cuénot; *Rapa Nui* by Jacek Herman-Izycki; *Osterinsel* by Horst Gattermann; *Isla de Pascua / Easter Island* by Felipe Soza Larraín. The latest addition to this large-format category, at 11.5" × 11.5" (29.21 cm × 29.21 cm) in size, comes from a name that should be familiar to all Rapanuiphiles — José-Miguel Ramírez. And both a beautiful and resourceful addition to every Easter Island bookshelf it is! Starting with a stunning cover photograph of Ahu Tongariki viewed from the sea, through 120 pages of text, photos, and illustrations, *Rapa Nui: The Navel of the World* is the English language companion to Ramírez's *Rapa Nui: El*

Ombligo del Mundo, which was also published last year. Dedicated to Gonzalo Figueroa and Papa Kiko, who died in 2008 and 2009, respectively, *Rapa Nui* easily appeals to neophytes as well as experts with chapter headers that include "The Roots of Rapanui Culture"; "The Mystery, Miracle, Magic, and Science"; "The Megalithic Splendor"; "The Fall of the Moai" and "History: The End of Isolation". Although there is a heavy reliance on references to island legends (which of course must be taken with a grain of sea salt), the content is solidly grounded in the latest scientific findings about the island and each chapter section features pictures of modern islanders — often children — providing a humanistic and contemporary context to the sequence.

The English translation by Peter W. Kendall stands out for its clarity, accuracy, and style, just as the beautiful photos by Nicolás Aguayo Fuenzalida and never-before published illustrations by Alfredo Cea transform the informational value of the book into an artistic, decorative possession. Among too many pictures and drawings to mention, there is a comprehensive map with 70 toponymic points identified, a robust, two-page spread of Easter Island fishes, no shortage of crisp images of wood and stone artefacts, and, to be expected, a decent assortment of the usual, familiar reproductions of engravings.

In a book that clearly celebrates the Rapanui re-creating themselves after centuries of rise and fall and resurrection, Ramírez has managed to blend together (in both the Spanish language edition as well as this edition) the visual beauty of Easter Island *and* the latest research interpretations while avoiding sensationalism or undue controversy, covering such topics as ancient geology; seafaring and navigation; the Taiwanese origin of early Oceanic explorers; DNA analysis; Lapita people; *marae* from regions elsewhere in Polynesia; linguistics; rock art; detailed discussions of astronomical orientation of some Easter Island *ahu*; the Birdman competition; explorers such as Routledge and Heyerdahl; causes of the island's decline (which is discussed with appropriate balance); and the end of isolation. The book is rounded out by the inclusion of a glossary and references.

In the book's closing words, Ramírez concludes, "Undoubtedly, the explanation for the Rapanui enigma lies not in reason, but rather in spirit — in that which the ancestors called *mana*". Yet, were it not for *reason* this book would not exist, so I think it's fair to say both forces contribute to the *mana* in this worthy new addition to the Rapanuiphile's bookshelf.